



**Speech by Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier
during his visit to the Academy of Sciences: "Germany and
Estonia – a chequered history, a common future"
in Tallinn, Estonia
on 23 August 2017**

I. A European day of remembrance

Today is 23 August – and I am pleased to be able to spend this day here with you. I am happy and grateful that you, the people of Estonia, welcome us Germans as friends on this day.

Today is 23 August. It is on this day that the weight of history can be felt in a very profound way.

This day reminds us that we are friends, and that friendship between nations and peoples must never be taken for granted. That friendship was often achieved through great hardship – and must be nurtured with great care. Nothing deserves our careful attention more than friendship between the peoples of the European Union.

However, this day also stands for the hope that animosity between nations and peoples is not set in stone either. It stands for the hope that freedom can ultimately prevail, and that the rule of law can assert itself.

History is never cut and dried, and memory is a complicated affair.

This also applies to the long and chequered history that Estonians and Germans share with each other, and it particularly holds true for 23 August. Seventy-eight years ago, Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union made a pact, splitting East-Central Europe between them. As the poet Tomas Venclova noted, this forced political leaders in the Baltic states to "choose between Hitler, Stalin and death, with one choice not necessarily precluding the others". 23 August marked the beginning of the darkest chapter in your country's history – and precisely 50 years on, it became clear that this darkness was about to end. On 23 August 1989, hundreds of thousands of people in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania

formed a human chain and embarked on the Baltic Way to freedom and national sovereignty.

23 August is a multi-faceted day of remembrance. Maybe that is what makes it particularly suitable as a European day of remembrance. That is how the day is commemorated here in Estonia and I believe this aspect deserves much more prominence in our collective memory, also in Germany.

I am certain that the more we tackle the task of multi-faceted remembrance not only within our national bubbles, but as a community, the more valuable our lessons from history will be. Today, I want to talk with you about the lessons we can draw for our common future.

II. The power of freedom

The first message I hear loud and clear here in Tallinn is about the power of freedom – a power that no inhumane ideology or totalitarian rule can put in chains forever. For me, the strongest image of this day is not the handshake between two cynical foreign ministers serving their respective dictators, but the hundreds of thousands of hands clasped in a show of bravery in 1989. The human chain extended from here to Vilnius. Above all, it was a singing and resonant human chain.

“Wake up, Baltic States!” was one of the freedom songs of the day: “Ärgake Baltimaad – Leedumaa, Lätimaa, Eestimaa!”

I’ve heard that this beautiful freedom song was sung in all three Baltic national languages along the 600-kilometre human chain. So let me add: “Bunda jau Baltija!” And in Latvia, the land of the dainas, people sang: “Atmostas Baltija!”

I know this is referred to as the Singing Revolution. But now that you have had a taste of my linguistic abilities, you’re probably glad that I didn’t go as far as to sing these lines to you.

Although I am now returning to my mother tongue, I deeply admire the unyielding yearning for freedom that is expressed in these songs. We deeply admire it. At the time, the love of freedom of the Estonians, Latvians and Lithuanians, which pre-dated the Monday demonstrations in the GDR, gave courage to many in the Eastern bloc. This love of freedom in the Baltics continues to inspire Europe to this day – and we urgently need it.

III. A new community is born

The second lesson we can draw from this day is that of European integration. And what a tremendous and historic stroke of luck it is can be seen when looking at this same day 78 years ago.

The Hitler-Stalin Pact marked the beginning of war, occupation and despicable crimes that were committed by Germans and on behalf of Germany. Ribbentrop and Molotov paved the way for Nazi Germany as it prepared for a war of aggression that would begin only a few days later with the Blitzkrieg attack on Poland, wreaking destruction and annihilation on the entire continent, setting in motion the murder of European Jews, and ultimately claiming the lives of over 60 million people.

In this region, the pact made on 23 August was not only the death knell of the Baltic states' independence, but also brought to an end many centuries of ethnic diversity, which included the Baltic Germans, who for generations had helped shape this country. With the Soviet occupation, mass deportations and forced resettlement began throughout the region.

In Vilnius in 1941, a young poet of Polish ancestry wrote: "Through a window I saw the Soviet tanks roll into Vilnius. [...] I went down to the river and sat on a bench [...] Looking at the sand, [...], the river and the sky, I sensed how all this would never be the same."

His words would turn out to be dreadfully true. This young poet – his name was Czesław Miłosz – went to Warsaw in 1941 and joined the underground movement. Shortly afterwards, the Wehrmacht arrived in the Baltic states and brought with it the racist barbarity of National Socialism and the unparalleled crimes of the Shoah. The day after tomorrow, I will visit Paneriai – a small, inconspicuous patch of forest outside of Vilnius, where more than 100,000 Jews were shot to death, the Jewish population in Lithuania was annihilated and the "Jerusalem of the North" ended in tragedy.

The European Union was conceived as the alternative to this all-consuming catastrophe – the alternative to war and rampant nationalism. With the European Union, we have gained a new community. It could only be completed because you, the Estonian people, and your neighbours said, "Yes, we are part of Europe's history, which has dark chapters and includes great suffering. However, we also want to be part of a different, peaceful and democratic European future. We want to do so not just on the geographic fringe, but in the midst of this community of values, playing an integral and active role." That is why you set out with determination, becoming a member of the European Union, the single currency and even NATO.

I know that, from Estonia's perspective, joining this new community meant first and foremost gaining independence and throwing off the yoke of the Soviet Union. Yet, from our German perspective, you became part of this new community because you extended your hand to us, to Germany, the country of the perpetrators of yesterday. This means that you want us to be part of this new,

peaceful community, that you value our cooperation and want us to actively assist you – even, I would like to add, in vital areas such as security and defence.

Our journey has been long and impressive. Maybe we don't note this often enough. Today, in 2017, in the day-to-day affairs of the European Union, we quite naturally refer to the "large" and the "small" member states, to "large" Germany and "small" Estonia. I want to honestly tell you today that, on this day, I see it the other way around. On 23 August I, as a German, feel small, and I humbly stand before the great Baltic states, admiring their great courage to forge a new future – courage that you demonstrated before others felt it.

You also inspire this courage in us Germans, by saying that we should not be bound by our chequered history. Quite the opposite – our history should keep us unbound, so that we do not repeat past mistakes and take wrong turns. This future will lead us down new and better paths.

It is this remarkable attitude that you Estonians are professing in the European Union. Your action points the way to a brighter European future. Europe's future cannot rest on an individual country's shoulders or be successfully shaped through shifting alliances, with the old-fashioned approach of large and small countries. It can be secured only if all parts bear equal responsibility for keeping the community together.

This is the perspective that you bring to the table in Brussels. "Unity through balance" is the motto of your current Presidency of the Council of the European Union. And you are translating into action the responsibility you have professed for European unity, by addressing issues such as burden-sharing in connection with the refugee crisis, national security and cooperation with our neighbours in the framework of the Eastern Partnership. Especially regarding the digital revolution, you are truly blazing a trail and driving forward development in this domain for Europe as a whole.

Believe me, in a day and age when some Europeans are losing faith in European integration and European values, many in Germany are grateful for the fresh European breeze we feel blowing our way from the Baltic Sea and the Baltic states!

IV. The strength of the law

Today's anniversary also holds a third message. In a peaceful Europe, it is the strength of the law that prevails – not the law of the strong. The Hitler-Stalin Pact marked the low point of a cynical policy of zones of influence and of great powers that subjugated countries and peoples to their will as if they were pieces on a chess board. We must never return to such a situation! We have overcome these policies in Europe. Yes, there are still larger and smaller countries in

Europe – but the European Union only has equal members, with equal rights and equal responsibilities. Moreover, we have the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the international law laid down by the United Nations, and the OSCE and its principles of national sovereignty and territorial integrity. All these achievements stand for the triumph over the brutal logic of 23 August 1939 in Europe and beyond.

And that is why those who violate international law and endanger the institutions of peace must meet with our joint resistance.

Internationally recognised borders cannot be changed unilaterally or forcibly. That is why we will not recognise Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea.

Equally, we will not tolerate covert intervention using hybrid means. Nor will we tolerate targeted disinformation, as you experience in Estonia and as we too were forced to experience in Germany in the case of Lisa F.

We reject military threat scenarios, such as those you have repeatedly experienced along your borders in recent years.

I assure the people in Estonia that their security is also our security. This commitment is not only part of our pledge of mutual protection within our transatlantic alliance, but also follows on from the lessons of 23 August that international law must be upheld. Those who attack this order endanger peace in this continent. Europe must not revert to an old spiral of confrontation and escalation.

V. Diversity and the rule of law

The rule of law is a pledge that should not only apply between free and sovereign nations, but naturally also among free and equal citizens. That is a further lesson of today's anniversary.

On many occasions in the history of the Baltic states, dictatorships wanted to force their totalitarian uniformity on the ethnic and cultural diversity that is an intrinsic part of this region – to impose the "same shade of unhappiness" described by Tomas Venclova.

Only after 1991 did the monochrome dictatorship give way to the vivid colours of a free society. But after the terrible experiences of the past, there is the question of how one preserves the diversity of a society and the freedom of its people. The people of Estonia provided the answer almost exactly 25 years ago. On 28 June 1992, the constitution was adopted by a referendum and a few months later, in his first speech to the people, President Lennart Meri very proudly said that "Estonia is governed by the rule of law".

I think it is a fortunate turn of history that German and Estonian legal experts worked together on this constitution at the time. One of these experts was my predecessor, Roman Herzog, a Federal Constitutional Court judge who later became Federal President. He died

early this year. Chancellor of Justice, my hope is that this cooperation between our legal institutions and experts, which dates back centuries to the days of the Hanseatic League and the law of Lübeck, will continue today. I would welcome more exchange, particularly among the young generation of lawyers.

Our lawful constitutions form the foundations for freedom and diversity. However, putting these principles into practice in society remains a challenge each and every day, particularly as regards the protection and integration of minorities and migrants. This challenge occupies almost all EU countries in one way or another. Here in Estonia, it applies in particular to issues concerning the Russian-speaking minority. In Germany, the integration of migrants is a major topic of discussion – especially now, when hundreds of thousands of refugees have come to our country. We are also particularly concerned about the turbulent situation in Turkey, as it has unsettled and worried many people with Turkish roots in Germany.

I do not think there is a patent remedy for successful integration – we do not have one in Germany either. That is why it is good that we discuss integration and the protection of minorities among ourselves in Europe and work together on a concrete level, such as in our joint initiative here in the Baltic states aimed at strengthening civil society and expanding the availability of independent and high-quality media, including in Russian.

After all, we are united in Europe by a common goal – equal rights are not merely an abstract promise of our constitution, but should be available to each and every person in their daily life in society.

This principle also helps us to withstand influence from abroad. The desire for the rule of law at home is inextricably linked with the claim to sovereignty in the world. If our constitutional states do their duty to ensure equal rights and opportunities and to address discrimination against certain sections of the population, self-appointed protecting powers will not be able to gain a foothold in our societies. No foreign country has the right to designate itself the protecting power of a group in our country or in yours. We reject the exertion of such influence. And incidentally, in a world characterised by increasing diversity within national borders, the desire to be a protecting power is a Pandora's box – and there are good reasons for keeping this box closed. Our stance is clear – we Europeans value and protect diversity and our people do not need self-appointed external protecting powers!

VI. History must not be a weapon

I spoke about the complexity of memory. However, I have no illusions either about the complexity of the present. We live in an age of tremendous and growing tensions. Here in Estonia, you live at a

fault line of these tensions. I am aware of how serious they are, for example as regards air policing in Ämari, a few kilometres from here. I will discuss the situation with NATO soldiers in Rukla in Lithuania the day after tomorrow.

As I have mentioned the lessons of history a few times, I would like to conclude by sharing with you what has become my firm conviction after many years of experience in politics, particularly in foreign policy, namely that we cannot allow history to become a further front line.

Yes, collective memory is complex. And at the same time, it is highly emotional. Collective memory provides people and entire nations with a sense of identity. But I firmly believe that history must not be a weapon.

On the contrary, I believe that the more we address collective memory together, the faster we will overcome misunderstandings and misperceptions and the sooner we will achieve understanding between nations. Almost ten years ago, I launched a project in which Estonian, Latvian, Lithuanian, German, Polish and also Russian historians examined the Hitler-Stalin Pact, which they partly perceived in different ways and on which they came to different conclusions. To be honest, this initiative fizzled out a few years later.

Instead, we are increasingly seeing how politicians are sharpening history into a weapon. Unfortunately, we are even witnessing such developments within the European Union itself. But we are also seeing how the Russian leadership is very deliberately shaping its country's self-image by defining it as different, indeed opposed, to us in the West.

We do not want escalation, and that includes an escalation of memory. Just as we do not seek confrontation over power issues, we do not want confrontation over memory.

Our view of today – from the low point of the Hitler-Stalin Pact to self-liberation and the newly acquired community of the European Union, is that this is our story, but it is not directed against anyone.

And that is why it also holds true for us that if we define ourselves by stressing our differences from others, we play into the hands of agitators. But in Europe, how we see ourselves always involves how we see others and how we see our neighbours.

For us Germans, the memory of 23 August 1939 is inextricably linked with 22 June 1941 and the merciless war of annihilation against the Soviet Union. One of the lessons we have learned from this history, which makes us an unwavering ally of the Baltic states, is that we have a responsibility to ensure that deafening silence or indeed blind animosity towards Russia never arise again. Despite all of the current

difficulties, about which one could give another speech, that is certainly one of the lessons of this history.

The Russian writer Daniil Granin, who died a few weeks ago, gave a speech to the German Bundestag in 2014 in which he recalled the Siege of Leningrad by the German Wehrmacht and the deaths of over a million people from starvation – a time whose ineffable cruelty he had experienced and suffered as a young soldier. At the start of his speech, he said, “Somehow I feel the urge to smooth out my memories, but I will not give in to it.”

We should follow his example. Those who smooth out memory may go on to distort it and ultimately to turn it into a weapon. But those who do not smooth it out, who accept the complexity of history, its contradictions and the views of others, do not lose anything as a result. They do not lose pride or self-esteem. Instead, they may actually gain something, namely the freedom to shake off the shackles of the past and to join others in shaping a more peaceful future.